

Brussels, 9 December 2003

OPINION
of the

Committee of the Regions

of
20 November 2003

on the

Communication from the Commission
Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe
COM(2002) 779 final

The Committee of the Regions,

Having regard to the Communication on *Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe* (COM(2002) 779 final),

Having regard to the decision of the Commission of 11 February 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community,

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 19 November 2002 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject,

Having regard to its opinion on *European benchmarks in education and training: follow up to the Lisbon European Council* (CdR 349/2002 fin)¹,

Having regard to its opinion on *The eLearning Action Plan - Designing tomorrow's education* (CdR 212/2001 fin)²,

Having regard to the endorsement by the March 2002 European Council in Barcelona of the *Detailed work programme on the objectives for education and training systems* and the specific objective *Making the most efficient use of resources*, which is informed by the Lisbon Council's call to increase investment in human resources whilst ensuring fair, efficient distribution of the resources available,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Action Plan for skills and mobility* (CdR 138/2002 fin)³,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Communication from the Commission – Towards a Europe of knowledge* (CdR 432/97 fin)⁴,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Communication from the Commission – Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (CdR 49/2002 fin)⁵,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Communication from the Commission: The eLearning Action Plan - Designing tomorrow's education* (CdR 314/2000 fin)⁶,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Adoption of a multi-annual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme)* (CdR 73/2003 fin)⁷,

Having regard to its opinion on the *Community action programme in the field of education "SOCRATES"*, the *Community vocational training action programme 'Leonardo da Vinci'* and the *Youth Community Action Programme* (CdR 226/98 fin)⁸,

Having regard to *The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems* (CdR 89/2001 fin)⁹,

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 86/2003 rev. 2) adopted on 11 July 2003 by its Commission for Education and Culture (rapporteur: **Mr Mastrocinque, Leader of Benevento Provincial Council** (I/EPP));

Whereas:

1) It is now clear that in today's society, knowledge, skills and abilities all combine to make up "human capital" which, at a time when the global economy is eminently flexible, is the individual's most important asset.

2) Consequently, improving human capital helps to secure success and prosperity for citizens and nations, and provides a means to ensure solid, mature democratic institutions, and a good level of social cohesion.

3) Providing, quality education for all citizens has become a top priority for all governments and a key factor in achieving the Member States' strategic objective of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world".

4) It is clear that the new demands of the knowledge-based society, the globalisation process, new basic skills (digital literacy, multilingualism, entrepreneurial skills, social skills) and learning how to learn, all require thorough structural reforms and a radical shift in education and training content and approach.

5) The global increase in active lifespans is curtailing the useful life of training courses, thus demanding a life-long learning approach.

6) The regional and local dimension of learning has been singled out as one of six key pillars for lifelong learning strategies in Europe,

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 52nd plenary session, held on 19-20 November 2003 (meeting of 20 November):

1. Views of the Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **welcomes** the Commission initiative to explore the issue of investment in education and training from a broader perspective, and taking into account three key elements: research, lifelong learning and the European employment strategy, within the general framework of the new demands posed by the knowledge-based society, globalisation, EU enlargement and adverse demographic trends;

1.2 **agrees** that with regard to general funding levels, human resources are underfunded by both the public sector, with no improvement in sight, and the private sector, which provides totally inadequate funding in key sectors such as higher education, adult education and continuous vocational training;

1.3 **shares** the concern that EU enlargement will lead to even greater underfunding and widen the gap between European regions;

1.4 **believes** it is right that an increase in funding should come from better use of existing resources, and from new, targeted public investment and larger private contributions;

1.5 **endorses** the Commission's view highlighting the need to adhere to the agreed education and training objectives in order to achieve the Lisbon strategic objective;

2. Recommendations of the Committee of the Regions

Making the most efficient use of resources (5)

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 **considers** it a fundamental objective to direct resources horizontally throughout the whole spectrum of education, from formal, through non-formal to informal, in an effective and efficient way;

2.2 **notes** that the conditions which cause students to fail and drop out of the system are created right from the very first years of study.

The implications of the "Objectives Process" in terms of investment

The Committee of the Regions

2.3 **believes** it is essential for the Member States to conduct an internal audit to identify areas of inefficiency and launch procedures to make better use of resources;

2.4 **agrees** with the conclusions of the Detailed work programme on the objectives of education and training systems, and with the investment areas deemed to be priority;

2.5 **suggests** that investment in the training and retention of teaching staff be included as a top priority area;

2.6 **underlines** the fact that the quality of education and training basically depends on the quality of teacher training;

2.7 **suggests** that teacher training should take account of the following basic tenets:

- the need for "learning for life" schools, where students are taught how to learn and to make informed choices about their education,
- a teaching approach in which the teacher facilitates learning within an interactive relationship with the pupil that respects individual learning pace and style and guards against maladjustment;
- ability to combine ICT, teaching/learning methods and specific teaching environments;
- use of ICT and eLearning for exchanges of experience and dissemination of best practice in different learning environments;

- ability to establish education tracks that prepare for mobility, permeability and entrepreneurship;

2.8 **considers** that investment in ICT is extremely productive, and has significant potential to improve education and training. This is because it facilitates access to continuous education, encourages cultural exchanges and promotes language learning, and involves all the other areas considered as priorities, such as providing universal access to education and inclusion in active citizenship;

2.9 **stresses** that investment in these technologies, in ICT and eLearning is essential to adapting education and training systems to the needs of the knowledge-based society and the European model, because;

- using the Internet requires a sound knowledge of one's own and other languages, and basic computer skills;
- it can help geographically disadvantaged groups to acquire the new skills required by the knowledge-based society;
- it also enables schools to set up twinning arrangements on the Internet, creating partnerships between schools in different European countries and establishing intercultural dialogue;

2.10 **underlines** the case for investment in guidance and counselling services.

Tackling areas of inefficiency

The Committee of the Regions

2.11 **considers** that a common list of possible sources of inefficiencies would help each Member State to carry out its own analysis;

2.12 **highlights** the fact that the common causes of all areas of shortcomings can be found in rigid curricula, poor quality teaching, poor links between training and production, rigid administrative structures, and the widespread perception that vocational training is a second-best option;

2.13 **endorses** the need for an overhaul of curricula and structures in order to improve the quality and relevance of learning opportunities, which must be tailored to the needs of a knowledge-based society that is open to all.

Efficient management of resources

The Committee of the Regions

2.14 **considers** that transferring the authority to organise education and training and to administer education resources to the local and regional level (DEVOLUTION IN EDUCATION) makes education and training more efficient. Attention must also be given to increasing the diversity of courses offered and improving the flexibility of syllabuses, transferring the responsibility for these matters, as well as for human resources and financial management also to the self-governing of schools.

2.15 **points to** recent international research and surveys (TIMSS/PISA) which have shown the correlation between students with the best results and schools' internal ideology and culture, as well as devolution in education. The Committee calls for attention to be given to developing a culture of flexibility within schools, e.g. the ability to select and administer their own staff, take responsibility for spending the financial resources available to them, and for adopting best practice in teaching and organisational methods;

2.16 **calls** for greater user involvement, including families and firms operating in the local economy that benefit from having better trained staff;

2.17 **suggests** establishing systematic comparisons with other schools and other school systems, with a view to cooperation and mutual growth, in order to encourage responsibility, cooperation, emulation and innovation;

2.18 **believes** that quality standards are needed to ensure equality and mainstreaming of the gender dimension;

2.19 **underscores** the need for quality to be translated into methodology benchmarks, operational and organisational plans, and any procedures that can offer suitable planning and feedback instruments;

2.20 **hopes** to see local authorities, administrators and teachers investing more in training to use resources efficiently, and to develop an assessment system able to guarantee and monitor quality at every stage;

The Committee of the Regions

2.21 **believes** that another crucial factor in restoring efficiency and achieving the objectives is the establishment of **partnership strategies** to ensure quality of education in a lifelong learning prospective;

2.22 **believes** it should be remembered that quality can only exist if it is also regarded as such by others. Encouraging families and businesses to volunteer more can help to spread a perception of quality;

2.23 **stresses** that the involvement of local partners who make a financial contribution, but who should in no way be allowed to influence teaching content, could provide productivity gains for students and teachers alike;

2.24 **calls** for promotion of the idea that better trained staff constitutes an investment for everyone;

2.25 **considers** timely the proposal to encourage firms to fund or co-fund equipment, study grants and training activities to attract students and apprentices, especially in areas in which there is a lack of suitably qualified workers.

Coordinating action

The Committee of the Regions

2.26 **sees, in the coordination of the ministries** for education, employment, research, and the environment, another crucial factor in restoring efficiency, in order to avoid fragmentation and dispersal of resources;

2.27 **feels** that the coordinated approach between the authorities responsible for education and training and for research and innovation is particularly useful, in view of the twin Barcelona objective to increase R&D expenditure and to encourage businesses to fund 2/3 of it;

2.28 **considers** that the setting of national and European benchmarks is an indispensable means for each country to situate its own achievements in comparison with others', in terms of progress towards the detailed objectives agreed for European education and training systems.

Efficient investments need to be anchored in the European context

The Committee of the Regions,

2.29 **reiterates** the validity of the subsidiarity principle, but feels it necessary to emphasise that individual reforms carried out by the Member States must sit comfortably within the wider European framework;

2.30 **considers** useful the provision of a clear and stable frame of objectives at European level, as a reference for all players and an aid to national development in education. This will also increase transparency, comparability and competitiveness in education.

2.31 **suggests** that it would be useful for every Member State to include citizens from other countries in the bodies tasked with ensuring quality and compatibility of criteria: external certification of proficiency (e.g. ECDL – TRINITY, the International Examinations Board);

2.32 **is convinced** that the most urgently needed reform is that of the syllabus, in order to provide for continuity and permeability, to focus it on the new basic skills and to tailor it to the needs of society and the economy;

2.33 **hopes** that there will soon be a transparent, user-friendly, reliable system for the recognition of qualifications and certificates wherever they have been issued in the European Union.

Brussels, 20 November 2003

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Acting Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

¹ OJ C 244, 10.10.2003, p.50

² OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p.26

³ OJ C 73, 26.3.2003, p.30

⁴ OJ C 180, 11.6.1998, p.49

⁵ OJ C 278, 14.11.2002, p.26

⁶ OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p.34

⁷ OJ C 244, 10.10.2003, p.42

⁸ OJ C 51, 22.2.1999, p.77

⁹ OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p.23

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